

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 62: Reference Resources ***

Back in 1994, I wrote my first book about the Internet. On page 12, I wrote "there is no encyclopedia available for free to the public on the Internet," which was true at the time. It wasn't until the next sentence, way at the bottom of page 12, when I started being horribly wrong.

"The reason for this is about what you'd expect," I wrote. "The companies that make encyclopedias are in business to stay in business, and you don't stay in business by giving away your product." Little did I know -- today, it seems every company is giving valuable information away on the Internet. I hadn't envisioned banner ads, strategic partnerships, electronic licensing fees, and other magic that would help make encyclopedias and other worthwhile resources available for free on the Net.

Today, there are encyclopedias available for free on the Internet, as well as a variety of dictionaries, thesauri, and other reference resources. (I can take small comfort, I suppose, in that I wasn't totally wrong -- not all reference resources are free on the Net today. It's not like they're giving away the Encyclopaedia Britannica: you've got to pay a whopping \$5 a month to access it online.)

Here's a roundup of some of the Internet's best reference resources... free, and otherwise.

-.-. Word Resources -.-.

Quick, what does chthonic mean? Look it up in the dictionary. Rather than thumbing through that ratty old book, point your Web browser to www.dictionary.com and type a word, or your best guess if you're not sure how to spell it. In an instant, the site will serve up the correct spelling and definition. Dictionary.com rifles through several sources, including Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, Princeton University's WordNet word database, the U.S. Gazetteer (for city names,) computing dictionaries and others. It couldn't be easier to use.

What's a nine-letter word for "drenched in sauce"? When you're ready to put the dictionary to good use, try the site's interactive Java crossword puzzle. I hope you have more willpower than I do: the game is so helpful, it's a little too easy to cheat.

The wordsmiths who brought us dictionary.com also created www.thesaurus.com, a Web-based thesaurus. Its search of synonyms is speedy (swift, rapid, quick, fleet, aliped, nimble, agile, expeditious...) and complete (thorough, exhaustive, sweeping, consummate, abundant, brimming), but it doesn't offer antonyms like the thesaurus on my desk does -- for those times you can only think of the exact opposite of what you want to say.

The site is built on an old, public domain version of Roget's Thesaurus. In addition to searching for specific words, you can browse the online book alphabetically or by word category. (Apparently Mr. Roget classified the entire vocabulary of the English language into six broad categories, such as words relating to space, words relating to matter, and words relating to

sentiment.)

-.-.- Encyclopedias -.-.-

In 1994, there wasn't a free encyclopedia on the Net. Today, all you have to do is point your Web browser to www.encyclopedia.com. By the site's own admission, this isn't the biggest encyclopedia around. It contains some 14,000 articles -- nothing to sneeze at, but not nearly as many as the Microsoft Encarta 98 CD-ROM (with 30,000 articles) or the Encyclopedia Britannica (with 72,000.)

But 14,000 articles isn't bad and the price is right. The site, based on The Concise Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, offers short articles on a diverse array of subjects.

The same company offers a \$60-per-year subscription service called Electric Library (www.elibrary.com), one of the few premium Internet resources that I pay for. The site lets you search the full text of more than 150 newspapers, hundreds of magazines, news wires, TV and radio transcripts, and 28,000 images and maps. It's a fantastic research tool, not really an encyclopedia, but encyclopedic in scope.

Encyclopaedia Britannica has a Web site, too, at www.eb.com. The site includes the complete encyclopedia, as well as Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and the Britannica Book of the Year (an annual book cataloging events of the year). You can probably search the whole package quicker than you could heft a single volume of the printed encyclopedia from the bookshelf.

The site is not free, but close to it. The cost is \$5 per month, or \$10 for ten "day passes" that can be used anytime within six months. If you want to try them out before forking over the plastic, both the Encyclopaedia Britannica and Electric Library offer free one-month trial subscriptions.

-.-.- Almanac and Quotations -.-.-

Infoplease.com is another impressive site, created by the folks who publish the Information Please Almanac. This free site includes data from their general almanac, plus sports, entertainment and kids' almanacs. There's also a dictionary and an encyclopedia (similar to the edition that Encyclopedia.com uses.)

There's a ton of great information here, although the site is rather cluttered. Unlike some of the other reference sites, Infoplease doesn't offer many hyperlinks within articles to other articles, which can make it difficult to hone in on interesting information.

Finally, for those times when you need to wrap up a newsletter with an apropos quote, there may be no better source than Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. You will find a well-indexed, public domain version of this reference at <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/bartleby/bartlett/>.

When we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted,
To sever for years.
(Lord Byron. 1788-1824.)

=*=*= RELEVANT WEB SITES =*=

Dictionary.com: www.dictionary.com
Thesaurus.com: www.thesaurus.com
Encyclopedia.com: www.encyclopedia.com
Electric Library: www.elibrary.com
Encyclopaedia Britannica: www.eb.com
Information Please Almanac: www.infoplease.com
Bartlett's Quotations: <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/bartleby/bartlett/>

=*=*= THE END =*=*=

The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

Copyright 1999 by Kevin Savetz.